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Gender Roles and Hierarchy in a Restaurant

For my ethnography I decided to observe the workers at a restaurant during their closing hour. My goals were to witness the manager interacting with the workers, the roles of men and women in closing, and patterns of hierarchy. The location of my ethnography was a restaurant in Bellevue, WA and took place from about 8:30pm to 10pm. For privacy reasons they asked to be kept anonymous but the environment is that of a café style. From my own work experience I know that behavior when a manager is present and away can be very different and also that interaction between men and women can be interesting. I wanted to see if what I had experienced was common in the restaurant industry. Guards are usually put down after the doors close so I chose to interact at night so I could see what really happens. I will be sharing my findings from my observation and later comparing them with observations from another restaurant for the ethnology to see emerging patterns. After observing for one night I believe the study could have benefitted from several nights to see if different managers and workers made a difference. The information I did find is intriguing and provides an insight to a restaurant after-hours.

Due to privacy reasons the exact location of my study has to be kept secret. I will describe the restaurant’s ambience and details about employees to provide a mental picture. The atmosphere is very casual at the restaurant and they have soft classical style music playing. The average customer is a professional and many people work, read, and do homework here. It is also a gathering place for friends and families and many people stay at the restaurant for a few hours to chat. Majority of the managers are in there mid to upper 30’s and there are equal number of women to men. The employee age ranges from 16 to mid 20’s and they are casual and laid back in their attitude. At one time there are one to two mangers working and five to six employees. Overall, the restaurant seemed to be average in terms of employees and customers.

My experience in the restaurant industry is what inspired me to observe a restaurant for my study. I worked for three years in high school at a restaurant and was humored by the blatant gender roles and attitude shifts when a manager stepped out. I expect to find similar behaviors during my time at this restaurant because it seems like typical actions. I conducted the study by sitting in the one of the booths and observing pre-closing and closing. The restaurant had an open food preparation area as well as open cashier area. This made it very easy to see the actions that took place. The doors to the back of the house were also open so I could hear conversation between the managers and the employees. I cleared my head of all my previous notions, remembering cultural relativism, so I could observe and take notes without bias. This was hard for me because I came in with previous knowledge and experience of what happens during closing but I knew it was essential to be true to the assignment.

The analysis of my observation is very similar to what I was expecting going into the study. There are two distinct patterns that emerged from their norms which involved gender roles and hierarchy. In the restaurant there were three distinct areas of service being cash registers, line cooking, and dishwashing. There were three female cash registers when I arrived, two men doing line cooking, and one man dishwashing. I found this to be typical because cashiering tends to be more popular among women. Also the dishwashing and cooking is commonly seen as too dirty or hard of work for women, stereotypically speaking. I also found that during closing activities the women were doing the chores such as sweeping, glass cleaning, and the “easier tasks.” The men did the heavy lifting and were the only ones who took out the garbage, threw anything out, mopped, or did any dishwashing of any kind. The women also chatted and sat around for periods of time while the men ran around trying to get everything done. It seems as if the men did all the work while closing while the women did smaller chores to make it look like they were busy. This reminded me of aged traditions when the women would stay at home while the man went to work and provided for the family. The way the women acted could have been stemmed from this, laziness, or the knowledge that the men were hard workers that wouldn’t complain. This was slightly different than my expectations as I didn’t expect the women to do as little as they did.

My second analysis is the amount of hierarchy that occurred during my time at the restaurant. There was one manager present during the close who was mostly locked away in the back office for the night. I did notice a difference in behavior from when she would emerge from the back. Whenever the employees heard the office door open they would immediately move into fast forward doing their jobs, or at least appear like it. There was a mood of intimidation between the manager and employees like they had been ridiculed for their work in the past. As soon as she went back into the office the women would continue chatting, phones would come out, and work was done at a speedy half-assed pace. I pinpointed this pattern as a lack of communication between the workers and the manager. The only time she interacted with them was to bark orders or inspect the closing at the end of the night. If there had been another manager I feel like the employees would have equally and correctly closed the restaurant for the night.

Ethnology and conclusion omitted for now, which is why there is under 1500 words.